

# A peek into the world of India's toy start-ups

Long before the call for Atmanirbhar Bharat, toys were very serious business for some Indian entrepreneurs

Written by [Paromita Chakrabarti](#) | December 13, 2020 6:20:58 am | Indian Express



Ways to wonderland: The best toys are those that make the child an active participant in play (Illustration: Suvajit Dey)

Outside the forest, a board welcomes visitors into its canopied universe. A single slender loris peeks from a branch. As the park gates open, the four jeeps make their way into the protected forest area from different zones. The roads are sinuous and every turn brings surprises.

Sometimes, it's a bird call that alerts the visitors to the presence of wildlife ahead.

Sometimes, a half-glimpsed watering hole holds that promise. Like all forests, this one, too, demands courtesy. If you speak loudly instead of letting the silence of the forest draw you in, there are penalties. But for those who play by the rule, the forest gives you bragging rights afterwards, rewarding you with sights that you'd always dreamed of. A roll of the dice and you could catch sight of a lion hunting his prey; another roll and it could even be the elusive cheetah with its cubs.

While the [COVID-19](#) lockdown was in place, it was this board game — African Savannah by the brand Kaadoo — that had kept Srimanti B occupied. The 11-year-old would have been on her first trip to a forest in May this year but, as all travel plans collapsed under the weight of

the [pandemic](#), it was this board game she received as a gift from her uncle that came to the Hyderabad-based fifth former's rescue. "I just liked the idea of travelling with the game because I couldn't even go out to meet my friends. I hadn't heard of some of the animals, so later, I would look them up on [Google](#). It was good fun," she says.

If play is intrinsic to childhood, it is also marked by degrees of inequality and inaccessibility.  
(Illustration by Suvajit Dey)

represented segment in India and this gave us the hope that the business, if executed well, stands a good chance to succeed in the market,” says Ganesh Subramaniam, a chartered accountant and an entrepreneur, who built the brand with wildlife photographer Diinesh Kumble and visual communicator Raviraj Joshi. Since Kaadoo’s launch in October 2015 with two safari-based board games, the brand has now grown to offer about 50 board games, puzzles, strategy and card games. Marked by sleek designs and attention to detail, their games measure up to the standard set by evergreen board games such as Cluedo, Scotland Yard or Settlers of Catan.

Even before the Prime Minister urged Indian entrepreneurs to promote India’s cultural heritage through home-grown toys in his monthly radio address in August this year, a start-up culture had slowly begun taking shape in the segment over the last five years.

Hyderabad-based Pramod Ponnaluri and his wife Rohini Deepthi Natti launched Kitki, an experiential learning company in 2013, that would partner with schools in the region to organise curriculum-based workshops and field visits. Soon, they realised that not much had changed since they were in school — there was not enough focus on making learning fun. In 2015, Kitki began designing educational board games for 8+ years, with a focus on mathematics, history and natural science. At a time when board games and toys are jostling with online games for attention, Ponnaluri says, their games aim to be both entertaining and cerebrally engaging. In Three Sticks, for instance, a board game that focuses on concepts of geometry, players win points by making complex shapes with a limited number of sticks. In Fossil Wars, a card game, dinosaur fossils have to be assembled as exhibits, based on parameters of age, food habits, etc.

Each game, says Ponnaluri, takes between four and six months to design. “Which means that once we identify a topic from math or science or any other subject, we may quickly ideate on the core gameplay but we spend a lot of time in refining it. In the end, the game has to be as good as any game — not just good enough for an educational game. Each game typically goes through 10+ iterations, interspersed with internal and external play-testing. Even after all this, there were times when we chose to not launch a game because we weren’t convincingly proud of the final product,” says Ponnaluri.

If Kaadoo and Kitki cater to a pre-teen to adult audience, there have been others who have stepped in to fill the lacunae in the Indian toy market for younger children. In 2012, when Meeta Sharma Gupta, 43, returned to India from the US and settled in Bengaluru, she was struck by the lack of options in age-appropriate toys for her two sons, then aged three years

and nine months, respectively. Averse to giving her children the readily-available “Made in China” toys, Gupta began searching for niche manufacturers, who offered high production values and innovative designs. Over the next two years, as she came in contact with a community of like-minded parents and small-scale producers and designers, she realised that there was a ready market for play and development toys for infants and toddlers. The idea of Shumee was born, an online toy store catering to early-year play needs, that she formalised in 2014. “Children learn a lot through play and I found that like me, there were other parents too, who knew what sort of toys they wanted their children to be introduced to or what safety standards they wanted manufacturers to adhere to,” she says. As a child, she’d grown up with wooden toys and Gupta found herself gravitating towards the material, replacing plastic with wood and other eco-friendly materials in the toys and games her brand produces. These include everything from pretend wooden medical sets to toy utensils, stamp sets and Ramayana memory games to even games based on folk tales. Operating with a lean team and having an online store to reduce overheads have helped maintain the balance between price and quality. “In a price-sensitive market like India, that’s crucial,” says Gupta, who has a strong client base among NRI parents in the US, the UK and the UAE.

If play is intrinsic to childhood, it is also marked by degrees of inequality and inaccessibility. In the years after liberalisation, while the easy availability of plastic factory-made Chinese imports disadvantaged the various toy hubs in the country — the wooden Channapatna toy makers in Karnataka, the clay-doll industry in West Bengal’s Krishnanagar or the Kutchi toys of Gujarat, to name a handful — it also raised the aspirational appeal of visually-pleasing, steeply-priced mass-produced toys such as Barbie dolls. A new culture of play emerged that prioritised consumption over innovation and undermined the painstaking work that went into mud, cloth or wooden toys in favour of “fast” plastic toys.

For almost all his working life, Delhi-based design educator Sudarshan Khanna, credited with revolutionising toy design in the country, has worked towards the democratisation of play. Khanna’s pioneering engagement with toys began 40 years ago, when he taught at the National Institute of Design (NID), Ahmedabad, and where he was instrumental in starting its toy and game design programme in 2001. “In India, we never looked at toys from a design perspective. Our approach always was to copy something that was being sold in the West. To make a good toy, one needs to understand the principles of play. Unless a toy is an act of discovery for a child, what purpose does it serve?” asks the septuagenarian.





Surabhi and Sudarshan Khanna at a workshop in Germany. (Source: Surabhi Khanna)

Khanna, who was conferred the National Award in 1996 for his contribution to design science for children, believes that the best toys are those that break down the rural-urban divide by being accessible to all and by making the child an active participant in play. Over the years, he has collected toys from around the country, understanding the principles behind their actions and says some of his best learnings have come from rural toymakers. In his hands, twigs and twine, discarded bits of cardboard, paper, pencils and shells and other expendables have come together to magically form spinners and boomerangs, wind wheels and mango-seed fans, giving children an insight into easy scientific principles and encouraging the ability to think for themselves. “People think expensive toys are always better, but my response to that is that it’s like well-presented junk food. It always looks more appetising than healthy food. A good toy is based on ideas rather than materials. The best learning from a toy comes from breaking it and then remaking it,” he says.

It’s a philosophy that is endorsed by another play pioneer in the country, Arvind Gupta. For decades, Gupta, 67, has introduced children from all kinds of backgrounds to the simple pleasure of fashioning toys out of waste materials, and, through it, learn about basic scientific principles. “Someday, I dream that every housing society in the country will have an apartment reserved for children for an activity centre, where all kinds of junk — plastic bottles, used pens, cartons, newspapers and some ordinary craft tools — will find a place.

Here, all the neighbourhood kids will come and have a great time making toys. All for free,” he says.

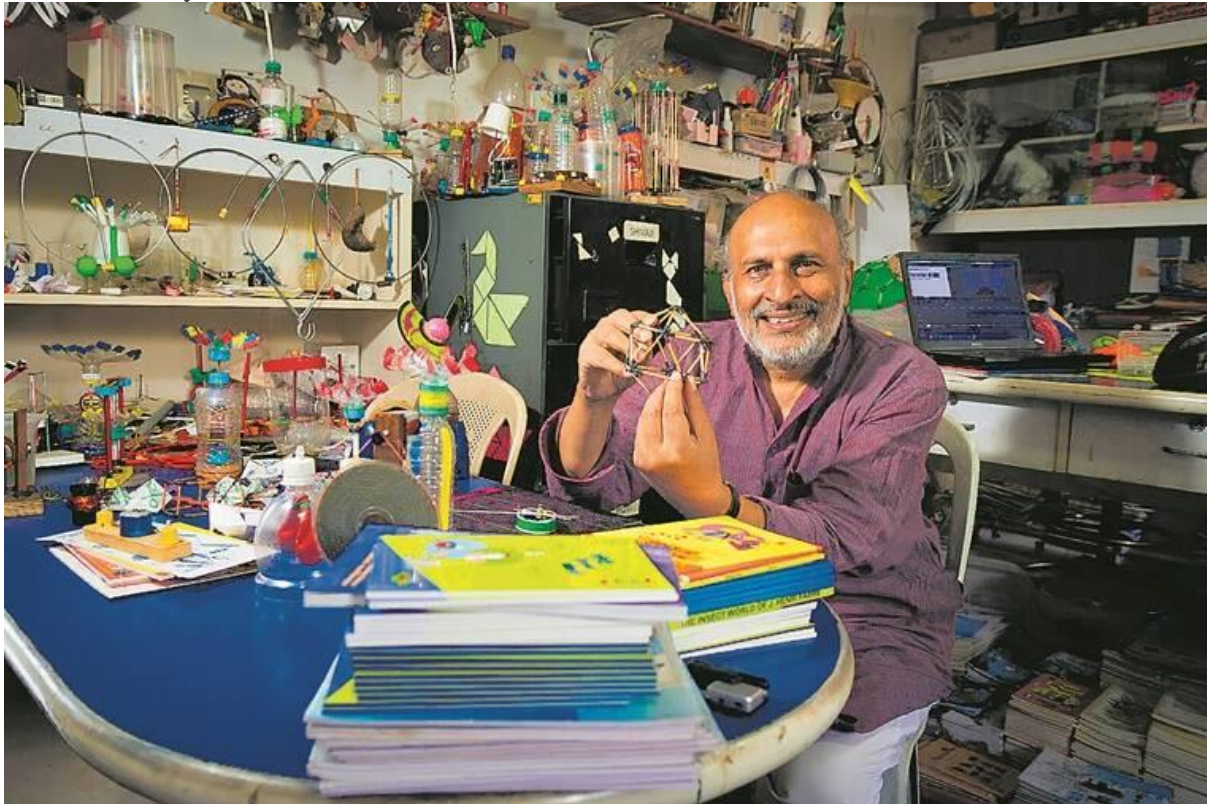
Both Khanna and Gupta are hopeful that the government’s push for indigenous toys will give the industry a much-needed boost and motivate manufacturers to invest in research and development that keep in mind the demographic variety they are meant to cater to. And, in keeping with their vision of inclusivity, they hope that the small-time toy makers of India, who work with minimal machinery and little support, will not be overlooked in the process; that the ease of business that the government is pushing for will embrace them, too.

In the years since Khanna set up the toy-design course at NID, most design institutes now offer a course in toy making. But Gupta believes change can only happen when it is initiated at the grassroots level. “A few years ago, the Prime Minister gave the slogan ‘Make in India’. Perhaps, soon he realised that unless children dirty their hands and start making things in school, right from kindergarten, there will never be a ‘make in India’. The Atal Tinkering Labs in schools (both private and government) is a splendid idea. It is one of the best initiatives to unleash creativity of ordinary children. They can make simple models, learn from each other and enjoy the fun of doing real science,” says Gupta.

Since the Prime Minister’s call, various proposals are underway to promote India’s indigenous toy industry. These include the inclusion of toy making in the National Education Policy 2020, the implementation of a mandatory quality control standard for imported toys and a similar safety certification for home-grown ones, besides a plan to build the world’s largest toy museum in Gujarat’s Gandhinagar.

While the wider implications of the impetus and how its implementation pans out — particularly for small-time toymakers spread across India who have little knowledge of bureaucratic processes — remain to be seen, the start-ups are hopeful that the push will help the industry. “There’s no doubt that we were finding it very difficult to compete with the scale at which some of the foreign competitors were operating. We were being undercut massively. With this government initiative to promote domestic production, we are hoping that the bleeding of domestic brands will reduce and there will be an incentive to be more innovative,” says Subramaniam. While Gupta hopes that the regulatory process and its bureaucratic red tape would ease up to accommodate small businesses like hers, Ponnaluri emphasises the need for larger production facilities. “We have always produced our games in India, except for a few tiny components such as pawns and dice, which we import from China. We have not found the right partners in India for these wooden components and the

duties levied on the imports hurt us. We hope bigger factories are set up in India, where such wooden components would become available and economically viable for game designers like us,” he says.



Arvind Gupta is hopeful that the government's push for indigenous toys will give the industry a much-needed boost and motivate manufacturers to invest in research and development. (Photo courtesy: Arvind Gupta)

In a country like India, with a vibrant tradition of heritage toys, play and playthings are also tied up in memory. Khanna's daughter Surabhi, 34, faculty of industrial design at the NID, Haryana, says that one of the things that she always tries to pass on to her students is the link between an individual's memory of play and how that can enhance one's approach to a design that endures. "Play is not just about creativity but also about continuity. I always tell my students that the design should bring out some of our own stories or memories," she says. This element of familiarity is what lends a continuum to our memories of play across generations. Mumbai-based Pritha Roy Gupta, 38, grew up playing ranna-bati (cooking games), playing teacher to her mother's plants or using her grandmother's towel to pitch a tent. "Although I had dolls, somehow I was pretty destructive and broke them quite badly," she says. She has introduced her four-year-old son Anshuk to cooking sets and puzzles, Lego blocks and other toys. While the first is a hit, there is something else that is especially close to his heart — construction vehicles — especially "monster trucks and dumper trucks" he trills, echoing generations of little boys before him.

